**When the Church Stops Working**

By Andrew Root and Blair Bertrand

**Study Guide**

**Ch. 8: “Nothing Can Separate You”**

A watchword is found not made. A watchword proclaims rather than brands. A watchword has a season, and then it is gone. We wait for a watchword, let it work on us, and then if fades, and we wait again. This is the rhythm of church life that Root and Bertrand describe in this book.

Watchwords emerge differently in different contexts and for different reasons. Peace Lutheran’s watchword that emerged at the beginning of Pastor Mike’s tenure—“Nothing can separate us from God’s love. This is a God who stands with us and for us, on our side”(p. 145)—arose out the painful experience of the middle-school Sunday School class teacher’s parenting of their deaf son and his eventual death. The entire congregation shared with them as they went through those experiences, and their story was the church’s story. So, when the Jurgenson’s one and only Sunday School lesson became the watchword for the church, everyone knew what it meant and why it meant so much.

That watchword faded over time. Not because of neglect but because God’s work in that church had moved it to a new period of its life. So, their leadership called for a period of discernment, of doing less so that the congregation could wait, tell their stories, and listen for a new watchword. Eventually it came, “Never alone.” But this one was a mystery. It seemed plain to all that it was their new watchword. But, unlike the pervious one, its significance to them was not apparent; then came CoVid, and all was clear.

Waiting for a watchword is not the same as looking for one. We can evaluate, study, and create mission statements that guide us in the practical task of marketing our church to the larger community. *But that model of ministry—driven by our fear of decline—is secular.*  It is driven by us and draws us in to the acceleration of never enough because the measures we use are quantitative and open-ended. If more people, more programs, more revenue, are the measures of ministry for us, we never get to enough. We get caught in the cycle of acceleration working harder and faster to accomplish a goal that can never be met because enough is always a little bit more.

Instead, our goal is to encounter the God who is truly God. So instead of getting into gear and using all our considerable human talents, resources, and skilled, we wait. We tell our stories as we wait. And, out of that waiting, we encounter and hear God. A watchword emerges that encapsulates our individual stories and our corporate story. That word gives us focus, provides a core to what we proclaim, and guides us into ever deeper encounters with God.

Instead of figuring out what needs to be done and doing it. We listen and discern for what God has done and is doing. The watchword is an expression of what God is to us and is doing in this season of our church life. It aids us into the next season, and fades as it has done its job. So, we listen, story, and wait for the next.

Pastor Mike learned that two things happen during a period of waiting and discerning: 1) More change happens during those times than when are a “working.” 2) The watchword emerges—it is not forced, created, or manufactured. It is not a product of our effort; it comes from God. We listen and accept it.

The temptation during the waiting period is to do more, to accomplish, but the doing interferes with the listening, and we end up doing a lot but likely not what God would have us do. Have you ever been in a conversation with someone, and you realize that you are not listening because you are so busy getting ready to say something? To listen to God, we need to stop being busy and just listen. We need to believe that God is doing things, acting in our lives, and we tune ourselves to what God is doing by telling our stories as we wait. Watchwords emerge from that telling.

**REFLECTION:** How do we feel about waiting? How do we wait as a congregation? What is your story and how is it part of Southminster’s story? Have we had a watchword, even if we did not call it that? Does that watchword serve us now, or is it time to wait and listen for a new one? Perhaps the most important question is, do we believe that God has acting in us and through us at Southminster? Do we believe that God is acting now and will continue to act in our congregation and our lives in the future? If so, what is next for Southminster will come from waiting, listening, and telling our stories about God.